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## AESTHETIC AND IMAGINATIVE ELEMENTS IN THE WORDS OF JESUS

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The scribes and rabbis of Christ's day were singularly lacking in imagination. Hence they could bring forth out of their treasure lore things old, but nothing new, fresh, stimulating. "Rabbi Jehudah said," "Beth Shammai decide," "But Beth Hillel decree," "Another objection is made: It is written," and so on, through weary disquisitions and endless verbal quibblings of ancient teachers. A veritable desolation and a waste were the methods of contemporary rabbis when our Lord startled the multitudes by teaching as one having authority and not as the scribes. These, with quotation in endless genealogy back to the distinguished teachers of the past, led their pupils through an arid wilderness of musty and often meaningless precedent.

Jesus, on the contrary, was rich in imagination, without which no teacher can bring forth things new. It was this element in Christ's method of presenting truth that caused the masses to hear him gladly (Mark 12:37). He was an artist, a painter, a poet. What he touched he vivified. When the rabbis were done with a doctrine it looked like a plant after a blasting wind of the desert had blown over it. Jesus made the old teachings so live again that they showed the bloom of youth in their full-blown petals; for he came not to destroy but to fulfill. So there is altogether wanting in Christ's method any of those ways of the rabbis by which much was hung upon a letter, a word, or some quirk or turn in grammar. Far freer was he, of this, even than the great apostle Paul, who, brought up at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), could not altogether divest himself of this method; as when he writes of "seed" and "seeds" (Gal. 3:16); of the bond-woman and the free as Mount Sinai, and the Jerusalem that is yet to be (Gal. 4:23 ff.). Jesus, going to the Old Testament and drinking "immediately where it springeth," had no need to travel the dreary road of the Jewish scribe. That he knew the Old Testament was

admitted by his critics when they exclaimed: "How knoweth this man letters having never learned!" (John 7:15); that is, from a rabbinic school.

Observe, then, how the poetic temperament of Jesus led him to the use of the Old Hebrew forms of poetry, so familiar in the psalms and in other poetic portions of the Old Testament; such as is found in the "Wisdom books" and in the glowing addresses of the prophets, as their very souls burned with the fervor of their themes, breathed upon from above.

Parallelism, the most common mark of Hebrew poetry, is quite common in the words of our Lord. Someone has called this balancing of line against line "Nature's own poetry," since it is found in the rise and fall of the fountain; the ebb and flow of the tide; the swinging to and fro of the bough, with which the wind plays; the alternate strokes of the wings of the flying bird; the heaving and sinking of the bosom when emotion holds sway.

The so-called "Beatitudes" (Matt., chap. 5) are among the choicest examples of the simple Hebrew couplet:

Blessed are the meek  
For they shall inherit the earth. (Vs. 5.)  
  
Blessed are the pure in heart  
For they shall see God. (Vs. 8.)

Indeed, the entire "Sermon on the Mount" is in form more or less poetic, as is oriental oratory generally.

Christ used the synonymous parallelism:

How shall we liken the kingdom of God,  
Or in what parable shall we set it forth?—Mark 4:30.

The examples are numerous; as in the lines:

For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed;  
Nor hid, that shall not be known.—Matt. 10:26.

Antithetic parallelism is frequent:

Heaven and earth shall pass away,  
But my word shall not pass away.—Matt. 24:35.

And again:

The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests,  
But the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.—Matt. 8:20.

The antithesis is sometimes double:

They that are whole need not the physician  
But they that are sick,  
I came not to call the righteous  
But sinners to repentance.—Mark 2:17.

Of similar variety are the following lines, except that in the words just quoted the antithesis is in the respective lines of the couplets; while in the following the antithesis is in the couplets themselves:

If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not  
Because he seeth the light of this world,  
But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth  
Because there is no light in him.—John 11:9 f.

For further examples of antithetic parallelism, see Matt. 21:44; 26:41; 6:14 f.; 4:25; 12:35.

There are also examples of "introverted parallelism," i. e., where the lines that are, in sense, parallel, are not in the same couplet (as *a, a', b, b'*), but *a, b, b', a'* (cf. the rhyme in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* where the first line rhymes with the fourth and the second with the third):

Give not that which is holy to the dogs  
Neither cast your pearls before swine,  
Lest they trample them under their feet,  
And turn again and rend you.—Matt. 7:6.

It will be noticed that while line one is balanced against line two, and line three against line four; yet lines one and four belong together as referring to *dogs*; while lines two and three are to be taken together as referring to *swine*. So also there are examples of "alternative parallelism," as in the words:

If ye keep my commandments  
Ye shall abide in my love.  
As I keep my father's commandments  
And abide in his love.

Here we have the form *a, b, a', b'*, lines one and three balancing; and lines two and four.

What Professor Moulton has called the "envelope structure" is found in several passages (cf. Psalm 8, where the poem is enfolded between the lines repeated, "O Lord, our Lord how excellent is thy name in all the earth"). In Matt. 7:16-20, we have:

*By their fruits ye shall know them:*

Do men gather grapes of thorns  
Or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit  
But the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit  
Neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit;  
Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit  
Is hewn down and cast into the fire.

*Therefore, by their fruits ye shall know them.*—Matt. 7: 16 ff.

So also there is an interesting example of this same *envelope* effect, with the lines within the envelope, introverted,

*No man can serve two masters*

For either he will hate the one	(a)
And love the other	(b)
Or else he will hold to the one	(b')
And despise the other.	(a')

*Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*

("Love," corresponds with "hold to;" "hate" with "despise.")

The ordinary couplet of Hebrew poetry often yields to the tristich, which we see (doubled) in the well-known words:

Ask and ye shall receive,  
Seek and ye shall find,  
Knock and it shall be opened unto you:  
For every one that asketh receiveth  
And he that seeketh findeth  
And to him that knocketh it shall be opened.—Matt. 7: 7 f.

While these instances of Hebrew poetry are scattered throughout the reports of Jesus' sayings, they are specially numerous in the more extended discourses and prayers, such as the Sermon on the Mount, Matt., chaps. 5-7; cf. Luke 6: 20-40; in the discourse to the Seventy, in the last discourse to the disciples, in the eschatological discourse in Matt., chaps. 24, 25; Mark, chap. 13; in the Lord's Prayer, Matt. 6: 9 ff. and "the intercessory prayer," John, chap. 17. But it is interesting to note how large a number of the best examples of this Hebrew poetry are found in the most Hebraic of the gospels, that of Matthew.

Our Lord's use of figures of speech deserves attentive study. He was a master in the art of illustration. While he did not originate the parable as a method of instruction, no other teacher used it so well.

The parables of the Lost Son (Luke, chap. 15) and of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) are among the finest brief specimens of didactic fiction ever written. They cannot be surpassed in any literature. And for a deft and artful blending of instruction from nature and from history there is nothing finer than the words of Jesus as he pointed to the rich scarlet as it crowds the valleys and even climbs the hill-tops:

Consider the lilies of the field—how they grow,  
They toil not, neither do they spin,  
And yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory  
Was not arrayed like one of these.—Mark 6:28 f.

“The Kingdom of heaven is *like*” was frequently upon Christ’s lips. “Unto what shall I liken this generation?” asked he concerning those who were too near to see themselves as he saw them. From the tiny seed cast into the earth, to the huge tree plucked up by the roots; from crude net cast into the sea, to the goodly pearl of great price; from the careless children playing in the market-place to “Solomon in all his glory”—the entire range of familiar nature and of human industry paid tribute to the Master’s power of lucid speech. Now simile, now metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, personification, parable—all illumined his masterful teaching. How expressive the figure, in the poetic words:

The lamp of the body is the eye:  
If therefore thine eye be single,  
Thy whole body shall be full of light.  
But if thine eye be evil,  
Thy whole body shall be full of darkness.  
If therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness,  
How great is the darkness!

There is nothing more tender, or more beautifully pathetic, than the personification and apostrophe to Jerusalem, lying in the distance, as he overlooked the city:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets  
And stonest them that are sent unto thee;  
How often would I have gathered thy children together  
As a hen doth gather her brood under her wings,  
But ye would not.

There is a tradition that Jesus wept but never laughed—and seldom smiled. And yet Jesus showed many times a keen sense of humor,

the ability to disclose the ridiculous side of some absurd situation—though never in a way that showed levity or frivolity. There is an old Russian saying which describes humor as “an invisible tear through a visible smile.” The Master was always of serious purpose, and yet how full of real humor is his description of the supercilious, self-satisfied Pharisee standing in the temple praying, enumerating his catalogue of virtues; thanking God he was not as other men, “or even as this publican!” The Pharisees lacked imagination; the ability to see the ridiculous side of their own performances; the implications of many of their dicta. Jesus with his vivid imagination and keen wit, laid all bare. Consider the humor in the description of the Pharisee as he “strains out a gnat and swallows a camel!” Or with what explosive effect the words must have come, “How much better is a man than a sheep!” And how subtly fine was the humor in the description of the men who excused themselves from attendance on the feast (Luke 14:18–20).

As practical as were the teachings of Jesus, the idealistic elements are among the most conspicuous features of his message. He presupposed the perfect man and let men know how such a one will act and think. He constantly sought to

Teach him to attain  
By shadowing forth the unattainable.

“Be ye perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” Matt. 5:48. He continually drew men’s minds aloft, by calling them from the earthly domain, as he spoke again and again of “the kingdom of the heavens.” In him life becomes “forever a disappearing and vanishing ideal,” toward which men move but which they never realize. There is no wonder that his life and teachings have enkindled the inspiration and genius of all the great artists since his day, of musician, poet, and seer. No wonder that Michelangelo and Raphael, Dante and Milton, Browning and Tennyson, Beethoven and Handel have done their best under the inspiration of his character and teachings. Their genius was but broken lights of that Light, which coming into the world lighteth every man. Theirs was an inspiration differing it may be, but no less real than that which enabled Isaiah to see the ideal reign of peace; or Paul to be lifted up to the heaven of heavens, or which introduced the beloved John to the beatific vision in which

he saw the crowning glory of all things, with the Lamb as the unfailing light (Rev. 22:5).

The Christ came to save the whole man, as well as the whole world; to redeem the *soul* of man in the sense of the psychologist as well as in that of the theologian. Religiously speaking no function of soul is more important than the imagination. The beginnings of sin lurk there and through the imagination, twin sister to faith, man sees the possibility of better things. It is not mere fancy. "Fancy," says Ruskin, "plays like a squirrel in its circular prison and is happy; but Imagination is a pilgrim on the earth and her home is in heaven."

So Jesus touched and enkindled the imagination of men, that he might exalt and purify their aesthetic as well as their ethical life; turning their ugliness into sweetness and light through the true "vision and faculty divine."